

How to Write a Philosophy Paper

DO

Be clear.

Unclear: “This presents an issue to the very essence of Ryle’s argument because the main argument he makes is that the issue of Descartes’ theory is the Category-mistake which causes it to be invalid.”

Clear: “Ryle accuses Descartes of committing a category mistake—Descartes assumes that two things of different logical types are actually the same logical type.”

Define your terms. Don’t assume your reader will know what you’re talking about by using a certain term.

Ex: If you say that computers lack true “understanding”, you’ll need to be clear about what you mean by “understanding”.

Be concise. Cut lines that are saying similar things. Don’t place value on complexity for complexity’s sake.

Signpost.

Ex: “In this paper I will...”, “Descartes argument from conceivability involves three steps. First... Second... Third”, “I’ve just shown x, now I’ll show...”

Use the first person when appropriate. Use “I” like you normally would. “I now want to consider an objection...”(Just don’t use it to voice an unsupported opinion.)

Use examples. Examples are a great way to illustrate your points.

Respond directly to the prompt. Make sure you understand what the prompt is asking you to do and do it. Reread your paper when you are done to make sure you have answered the question. You don’t want to write a great paper that doesn’t address the prompt.

Respond to objections if you have space.

Come see me to talk about your paper. Talking through the logical form of your paper can help immensely.

DON’T

Simply make your claim without defending it. Don’t just give your opinions. You need to defend your claims. Even (and especially) claims that you think are obviously true.

Assume your reader knows anything about your topic or philosophy in general. Pretend you’re explaining the issue to a friend who isn’t familiar with philosophy.

Insult the person you are arguing against. Even if you think he/she is crazy or stupid.

Vary your word choice for aesthetic purposes. Use the same terms over and over again.

Begin your paper with big, sweeping statements. “The deepest, most puzzling problem humanity has ever faced is the problem of consciousness.”

Use a lot of quotes. Too many quotes will distract and get in the way of your work.